DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 955 SO 009 238

AUTHOR Carey, George W.
TITLE Social and Community Diversity in the New York Metropolitan Region.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the plenary session of the Association of American Geographers (New York, New York, April 11, 1976)
AVAILABLE FROM George W. Carey, Department of Urban Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey 07102 ($0.70 paper copy)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Characteristics; Community Cooperation; *Community Relations; *Cultural Background; Cultural Factors; Economic Factors; *Ethnic Groups; Government Role; Human Geography; Local Issues; *Residential Patterns; Social Integration; Social Relations; Urban Culture; *Urban Environment

ABSTRACT

This paper describes various ethnic communities in the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area whose cultural continuity and identity are threatened by encroaching economic problems and government involvement. Each of these areas is mixed in population but has a dominant group that provides an ethos within which a stable, supportive social structure exists. This social structure emphasizes communal values above those of narrow hypercompetitive self-interest. The economic organization of the community reinforces this so that the community tends to occupy a sharply defined home turf set off from neighboring areas. However, the very ambience engendered by the community prods outside economic activity to tap and directly siphon off the resources developed by the communal activity, as in the commercialization of the old Italian neighborhood of Greenwich Village. Similarly, government intervention in the social functions of the community hinders the communal values of the community and develops a sense of narrow-minded individualism within its residents. Theoretical questions on how this situation can be prevented are stressed. (Author/DE)

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Social and Community Diversity in the N.Y.M.R.

A paper given at the New York Meetings of the Association of American Geographers, April 11, 1976

by

George W. Carey, Professor
Rutgers University - Newark

SO 009 230

Note: The paper was delivered accompanied by photographic slides. Some references in the text allude to them.

Social and Communal Diversity in the NYMR

Much evidence tends to show that residential areas in a large number of American cities tend to differentiate themselves broadly according to Socioeconomic Status, Family Status and ethnicity. By combining the attributes of high and low Socioeconomic Status with those of Family vs. non-Family life style, we arrive at four types of neighborhood which are much discussed in our literature.

--High-rise, high status neighborhoods of singles and childless couples can be readily distinguished.

--Single room occupancy blocks of poor solitaries are also common.

--Affluent neighborhoods of detached single family dwellings represent--if not the American dream, surely the dream of the American real estate industry: each middle class nuclear family residing in its well mortgaged bastion.

--Finally, the tragic and much publicized "slums of despair" inhabited by poverty stricken and often isolated families with dependent children.

I do not propose to discuss these four well known types further--they have been studied to death--except to observe that I consider the very raison d'etre of social organization in the city and elsewhere to be this: to further the stable continuity of the society's cultural heritage.

It is my belief that this communal value is badly served by all four of the

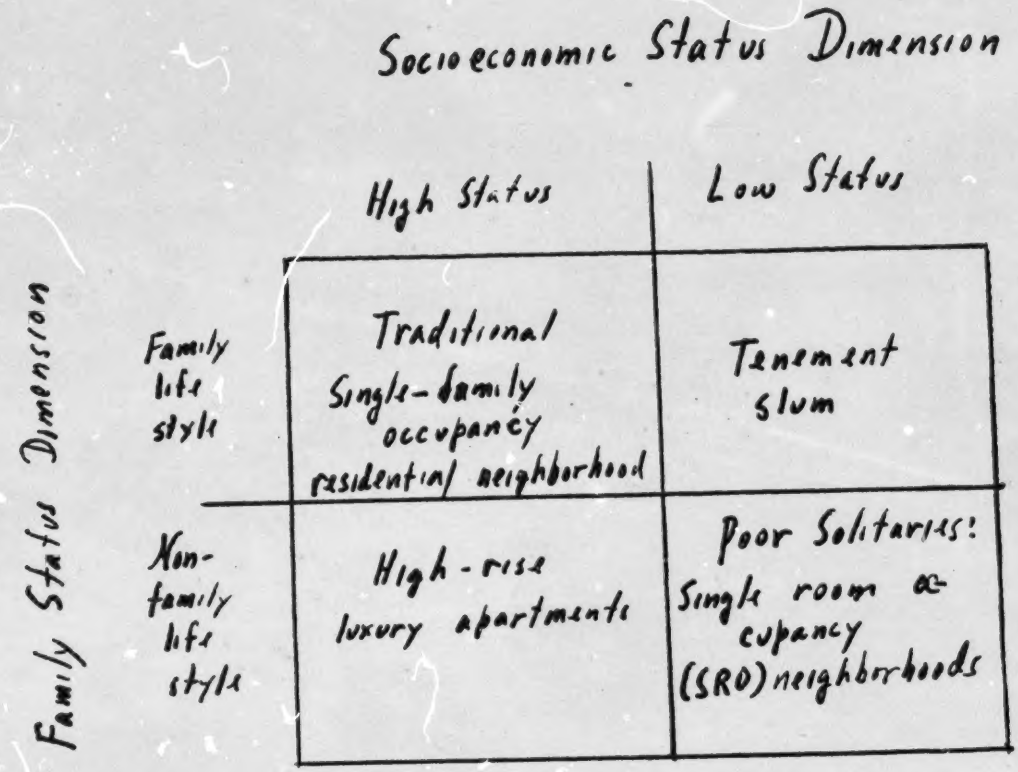

Figure 1: A typology of Urban Neighborhoods

neighborhood types thus far discussed.

--The inhabitants of the high-rise singles neighborhood tend to be mobile people whose primary attachment is to the workplace, not the community of residence.

--The nuclear families in the single-family house neighborhoods confront a contradiction of instability. If the neighborhood is desirable, the children are priced out of residence there and forced to migrate. If the neighborhood has slipped in environmental quality, they avoid it.

--The plight of the residents of the "slum of despair" is so grave in terms of social costs of service needs that it frequently threatens the survival of the municipality in which it is located. That municipality, in effect, is allocated the task of managing a problem generated by an entire society with the poor as pawns and victims in the process. And the only help allocated by national leadership is in the form of lectures on the virtues of parsimony and thrift.

--Finally, almost by definition, the S.R.O. neighborhood doesn't contribute to cultural continuity, unless one accepts the idea of a culture of poverty.

There is, however, a kind of community which is still alive and healthy in the New York-New Jersey Standard Consolidated Area which merits the name "community of mutual aid"--although its survival is threatened by the twin millstones of the Mega-economy and Mega-government.

Dotting the perimeter of the core of our region is a cellular arrangement of ethnic communities. In Queens, for example, we find neighborhoods which are distinctively Greek, and of a Haitian-West Indian mix, to name but two. The streets

of Newark's East Ward recall Lisbon, while those of Union City and West New York are Cuban in nature. A visit to Kearny, New Jersey, will reveal a concentrated United Kingdom presence--largely Scottish and Northern Irish, while more than two thousand Japanese now reside in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

While each of these areas is mixed in population, the dominant group provides an ethos within which a stable, supportive social structure emphasizes communal values above those of narrow hypercompetitive self interest. The economic organization of the community reinforces this, and the whole tends to occupy a sharply defined home turf set off from neighboring areas by clearly perceived boundaries.

Consider the Cubans in Union City/WNY for example. Relatively recent arrivals, an average of 28 percent of the population migrated into the United States between 1960 and 1970. The total population of the area is about 90,000.

In the core tract of the region, almost 55% of the population were recent immigrants and 50% of the population Cuban by 1970. The fact that the age distribution includes appreciable numbers of the young and the old, and the sex ratio is below unity (indicating a slight preponderance of females) confirms the observation that the social structure involves the extended rather than the nuclear family and that ties of godparenthood--compadrazgo--integrate groups of families into an interdependent social fabric.

An average of 25% of the labor force find employment within the area. The flourishing core business district established along narrow Bergenline Avenue thus provides employment as well as products at retail for the community as well as a sphere for community building entrepreneurship whose earnings are reinvested locally. It is noteworthy that local embroidery factories have been acquired by Cubans and employ Cubans.

"Basic" income entering the community is thus recirculated rapidly and freely through the highly interconnected internal economy, before filtering out. Under the circumstances there is much renovation and remodelling going on, and much construction on small parcels--row houses over garages or shops at a small, humane scale.

This old Masonic Hall has been transformed into the Liceo Cubano Jose Marti. This Protestant Church now has a Spanish preacher (and a sign in need of editing). This block has provided a communal playground for its children. Attentiveness to the presence of the elderly is betokened by a jitney bus service.

Physical terrain plays no little part in defining the community's metes and bounds. The eastern rampart of the palisades escarpment is unmistakeable, while to the west is a cemetary located on land sloping down to the Hackensack Meadowlands. The highway approaches to the Lincoln Tunnel lie to the south. Stand on Bergenline Avenue at the northern edge of the business district. To the north is a two-lane, two-way street. Turn around. The avenue narrows to one lane, and at the bottleneck--like an arcade in Havana--the Cuban business core begins.

These are not wealthy people. The poorest tract showed a 1970 mean family income of but $7,791, with a standard deviation of $5,570. There are other places with comparable incomes in the S.C.A. which are a crime-ridden shambles. The richest tract-oriented to the Palisade amenity--had a mean of but $13,387 with a standard deviation of $13,075. $8000-9000 was the average. Yet despite these facts, the percent of tract income arising from public assistance averaged only 1.2%. In classic suburban New Jersey, by way of contrast, Radburn--the pride of

American prestige planning--manifests a corresponding percent of 1.8 (about average for such areas).

Nor are the Cubans unique. The Greeks in Queens repeat the pattern of the "community of mutual aid." A communal ethos prevails. The nuclear family is transcended by the extended family and godparental ties. The narrowly selfish profit motive is transcended by enterprise for communal benefit. The domains of work, of social interaction and residence intersect in what the social geographers call dense social space. The interconnected internal economy traps and recirculates dollars for the benefit of all. Little dependence on public assistance is thus engendered. The perceived boundaries are sharp. Hell Gate, the Grand Central Parkway, the Con Ed installation on the north shore. An airplane on Laguardia Airport dimly glimpsed beyond the houses to the East.

Thus also the Portuguese of Newark repeat the pattern behind the wall of the Penn Central embankment in the district aptly called the "Ironbound." This thriving area of shops, social and cultural institutions and ethnic vitality is the only area in dying downtown Newark which preserves flourishing evening shopping hours. The ambience of these communities is one of satisfaction and happiness, with the upgrading of the living environment.

A great geographer from the rich heritage of our discipline, Peter Kropotkin--who was also a founder of modern anarchism (along with the distinguished French geographer and veteran of the Paris Commune Elisée Réclus) concerned himself in his 1902 masterpiece Mutual Aid with the study of just such manifestations of the communal aspects of the human spirit as these neighborhoods at which we have glanced.

He called attention to the forces of economic pressure and Political Authority in relation to their destruction.

Too often, the very ambience engendered by the community prods the Mega-economy into action to tap and directly siphon out the resources developed by communal activity, as in the commercialization of the old Italian neighborhood of Greenwich Village.

The result is a conversion of the community into one of the four classic types with which we began our discussion.

When the Mega-government intervenes, however, the effects can be equally devastating, sometimes leading to the creation and subsequent annihilation of a slum of despair as in Brownsville, East New York, which languishes in a state of misery and uncertain transition.

It is appropriate to recall Kropotkin's words here on the centennial of his escape from Russian prison to head the anarchist movement.

"The absorption of all social functions by the State necessarily favored the development of an unbridled, narrow-minded individualism. In proportion as the obligations towards the State grew in numbers the citizens were evidently relieved from their obligations towards each other. ...In barbarian society, to assist at a fight between two men...and not to prevent it from taking a fatal issue, meant to be oneself treated as a murderer; but under the theory of the all-protecting State the bystander need not intrude: it is the policeman's business to interfere, or not....the theory which maintains that men can, and must, seek their own happiness in a disregard of other people's wants is now triumphant

all round--in law, in science, in religion. It is the religion of the day, and to doubt of its efficacy is to be a dangerous Utopian."

Good. I am a dangerous Utopian. And I call upon all of us with a concern for Urban Planning to address such questions as these.

--How can Mega-economics and Mega-government be restrained from shattering these communities of Mutual Aid?

--How can boundary conditions be set so that those Americans--dangerous Utopians all--who from the Shakers to Noyes' Oneida Commune to the modern seekers of a communal ethic will be aided in their quest and not crushed?

--How can the conscience of our society be so awakened that the means may be forthcoming to help the residents of the classic four Urban residential types who so desire to reconstitute themselves in communities of mutual aid?